DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 320 263 EA 021 917

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TITLE Administrator Competency Testing: Status, Issues, and Policy Considerations. Policy Bulletin No. 8 .
INSTITUTION Consortium on Educational Policy Studies, Bloomington, IN.
PUB DATE May 90
NOTE 8p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Administrator Education; *Administrator Evaluation; Assessment Centers (Personnel); Elementary Secondary Education; On the Job Training; *Surveys; *Test Validity; *Training
IDENTIFIERS *Competency Based Certification; *Competency Tests

ABSTRACT

To address the issues raised by the possible expansion of administrator competency testing, a survey was sent to each state education agency in late 1988. Using survey data and a literature review, this paper discusses the development of administrator competency testing, explores pertinent issues, makes recommendations for policy makers opting to use these tests, and suggests workable alternatives. Currently, 15 states use administrator competency tests. So far, there is scant evidence that such testing has achieved its primary objective--ensuring that certification candidates have attained the knowledge required to fulfill the duties of a school administrator. Various issues associated with student and teacher competency testing programs are relevant to administrator competency testing. These include test validity, impact on preparation programs, minority recruitment, legal challenges, and costs. Alternative practices being used in several states include assessment centers, on-the-job training and assessment, on-the-job assessment without training, alternative forms of testing, multiple competency indicators, better recruitment strategies, and improved administrator preparation. Policy makers need to clarify objectives to be accomplished through testing, determine costs of test development, study other states' experiences, be aware of legal challenges and possible racial and cultural biases, and consider alternative practices. (43 references) (MLH)

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POLICY BULLETIN

Consortium on Educational Policy Studies
BLOOMINGTON, INDIANA

ED320263

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Fifteen states now require administrators to pass a competency test for initial certification. But administrator testing is a source of some controversy.

by Ulrich C. Reitzug

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In the 1970s student competency tests became a popular response to cries for accountability in education. The early 1980s saw the competency testing movement expand with the development of exams for teachers (Hazi, 1986). Several researchers have observed that competency testing for administrators may be a "third generation" in the competency testing movement (Eggington, Jeffries, & Kidd-Knights, 1988; Hazi, 1986). In fact, the National Policy Board for Educational Administration (1989) recently recommended the development of a national certification exam for administrators.

The possibility of the expansion of administrator competency testing raises a number of questions. What is the current status of administrator testing? What objectives are states attempting to accomplish with these tests? What can policymakers learn about administrator competency testing from prior experience with student and teacher competency testing? What alternatives exist to the use of administrator testing?

To help answer some of these questions, a survey was sent to each state education agency in late 1988. Follow-up surveys were sent to non-respondents in early 1989. Phone calls were placed to all states still not responding, with the exception of six states (Delaware, Georgia, New Jersey, South Carolina, South Dakota, and Utah), for whom recent information was available from secondary sources. Utilizing survey data and a review of competency testing literature, this paper addresses the above questions, makes recommendations for policymakers opting to use administrator competency tests, and suggests alternatives for those opting not to use them.

Current Status

The figure on page 2 shows the development of administrator competency testing through the 1980s. At the beginning of the decade, only 1 state (Georgia) required administrators to take competency tests. By 1986, this number had risen to 10 states. Although Alabama and New Mexico recently dropped their testing requirements, 7 additional states have implemented administrator testing over the last three years, bringing the current total to 15 states.[1] All these states require a passing score on the test for initial administrative certification.

Test Development

States utilizing administrator competency testing develop their tests through one of three methods. First, five states use the standardized National Teacher Exam specialty area exam in administration and supervision (EAS). Additionally, Ohio and North Carolina intend to begin using this test in 1990.

The second method, used by five states, is a test development process marketed by National Evaluation Systems (NES). This process consists of several steps. Initially, NES officials organize the knowledge base into content areas and write objectives for each area using a variety of materials, including university program descriptions and textbooks, state statutes, policies and regulations, and professional literature. Next, NES conducts an extensive job analysis survey, in which the state's practicing administrators and administrator trainers rate the importance of each objective to real-world administrative duties. Based on this survey, NES selects a subset of the initial objectives, writes test items for each objective, and conducts a field test. Throughout this process, a committee of the state's educators reviews the content areas, objectives, and test items, revising where necessary. After the test validation process is completed, the committee recommends passing scores to the State Board of Education, which sets the passing grade (National Evaluation Systems, Inc., 1987; Oklahoma State Department of Education, 1986; Texas Education Agency, 1987).

1. New York and Tennessee were included by Hazi (1986) as utilizing administrator competency testing but never implemented testing. (Testing was proposed but not approved in those states.) Connecticut was incorrectly listed as using administrator competency testing by Eggington et al.

Alabama discontinued all competency testing in 1988 due to extensive legal challenges mounted against the testing program. New Mexico ceased requiring the EAS specialty area exam in 1989. However, applicants initially applying for administrative certification in New Mexico who have not previously taken the NTE core battery must do so.

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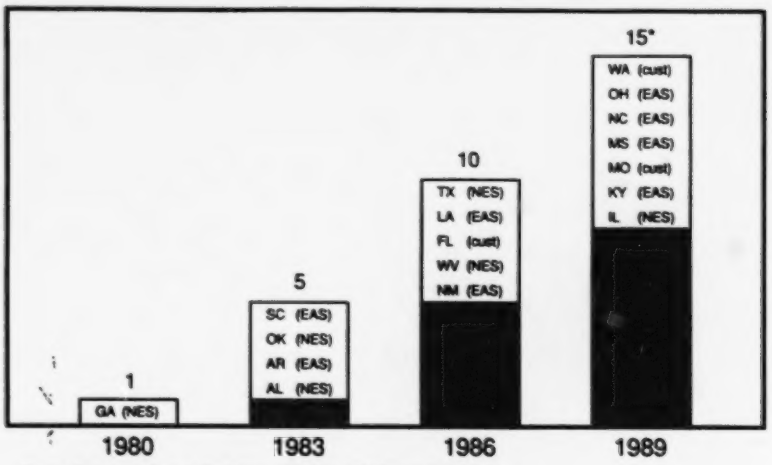
The third test development option, used by three states, is a customized test development process involving practicing administrators, university professors, and state department of education officials. The process followed is similar to that used by NES. (See Griffin [1988] for a detailed description of the process used by Florida.)

Growth of Administrator Testing



Sources: Eggington, Jeffries, & Kidd-Knights, 1988; Hazi, 1986; Reitzug survey, 1989.

Note: EAS stands for Educational Administration and Supervision Test.
NES stands for National Evaluation Systems.
"Cust" stands for customized test.

* Alabama dropped its testing requirement in 1988, and New Mexico dropped its testing requirement in 1989.

Objectives

Eleven of the 15 states that use administrator competency testing agree that the primary objective of the tests is to ensure that certification candidates have attained the knowledge required to successfully fulfill the duties of a school administrator (Reitzug survey, 1989). Two other states (Missouri and Washington) consider the improvement of administrator preparation programs through the use of competency testing as a major objective. (The remaining two states did not respond to the question dealing with objectives.)

Other analyses of competency testing have listed additional objectives (see Brandt, 1983; Eggington et al., 1988; Flippo, 1986; Hazi, 1986; Popham & Kirby, 1987):

- to identify at an early stage candidates unlikely to succeed in completing an entire screening process;
- to improve the image of schools;
- to compensate for problems with the selection process;
- to respond to the public's demand for accountability;
- to produce change in education.

Still others have suggested that the real objective of competency tests is to function as a symbolic and political gesture rather than as an actual reform (Ellwein, Glass, & Smith, 1988; Salganik, 1985). Ellwein et al. (1988) argue that competency tests are designed to give the *appearance* of accountability, with elaborate safety nets (test retakes, waivers, etc.) to catch those who fail, allowing states "to point to tough standards while doing business as usual" (p. 7). Indeed, test retakes are permissible in all states. It should be noted that courts have made multiple retakes a requirement in order for a test to be legally defensible (Goldman, 1984; Marshall, Serow, & McCarthy, 1987; Sendor, 1984).

Achievement of Objectives

Only seven states responded to the survey question asking the extent to which competency testing objectives were being accomplished. Of these, three states indicated that the tests had been too recently implemented to ascertain their effectiveness; one state listed "widespread acceptance" by the educational community and the absence of a court challenge as indications that administrator competency testing was accomplishing its objectives; and three states noted that high passing rates for the tests were evidence of their success.

These responses (and the lack thereof) provide scanty evidence that administrator competency tests are achieving their objectives. Widespread acceptance and high passing rates could simply imply that passing scores are set so low that administrators do not feel threatened by the test. Additionally, while high passing rates may provide evidence of knowledge base mastery, they do not provide evidence that knowledge base mastery will result in administrative effectiveness (see discussion of predictive validity, p. 3).

Ellwein et al. (1988) claim that efforts to assess the impact, utility, and value of competency tests have been "cursory and impressionistic" at best (p. 8)—in sharp contrast to the considerable time, energy, and money invested in test development. Perhaps, they suggest, this contrast underscores the symbolic function—as opposed to the instrumental benefit—of competency testing.

Issues

A number of issues associated with student and teacher competency testing programs are relevant to administrator competency testing. These issues include test validity, impact on preparation programs, minority recruitment, legality, and cost.

Test Validity

Numerous researchers have raised issues regarding the validity of competency tests (see Haney, 1984; Madaus & Pullin, 1987; and Neill & Medina, 1989 for detailed discussions of test validity issues). Validity issues fall into two categories: content validity and predictive validity.

First, does the competency test reflect the knowledge base of the field being tested? Each of the three methods of administrator competency test development use accepted processes to ensure content validity. The traditionally ac-

cepted knowledge base, however, is a reflection of administration in a top-down, bureaucratic structure. Numerous recent studies advocate alternatives to this traditional bureaucratic structure that provide for more employee participation in the leadership and decision-making of the organization (e.g., Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy, 1986; Clark & Meloy, 1989; Naisbitt & Aburdene, 1985; Peters, 1988; Reitzug, in press). These alternatives are likely to require knowledge other than that found in the traditional knowledge base, but current tests are unlikely to include this knowledge.

Second, is there a correlation between competency test scores and on-the-job performance? Although administrator competency testing is too recent a development to have acquired a body of research addressing its predictive validity, critics have cited numerous studies of teacher competency testing that have failed to establish predictive validity of competency test scores with classroom performance (Darling-Hammond & Wise, 1983; Linn, Madaus, & Pedulla, 1982; Madaus & Pullin, 1987). In addition, few professions have been successful in establishing predictive validity for their entry and/or licensing exams (Stedman, 1984).

Impact on Preparation Programs

Critics have argued that competency tests will drive the curriculum (Flippo, 1986). While only two states listed "change in administrator preparation programs" as a desired outcome of administrator competency testing, some degree of alignment between the objectives of administrator competency tests and administrator preparation programs is likely. This has certainly occurred with teacher testing programs, as some states condition accreditation of teacher education programs on the percentage of students passing competency tests. In the case of student competency tests, some courts have ruled that schools have a legal obligation to prepare students for the test (Marshall et al., 1987; Sendor, 1984; Stedman, 1984). Although no court has issued a similar ruling for teacher competency tests, the possibility of such a ruling is not farfetched. With or without the insistence of courts or the prompting of accreditation boards, preparation programs are likely to adjust their curricula, since the pass/fail rate of graduates on competency tests will be perceived as reflecting the quality of the program.

McCarthy (1989) argues that this is not necessarily detrimental if the test covers content necessary for effectiveness. However, as noted previously, questions remain about the content validity and predictive validity of administrator competency tests. In addition, some critics have argued that widespread testing may retard rather than advance the interests of those being tested, since an inordinate amount of instructional time may be spent on rote learning at the expense of higher level thinking skills that may be important for job performance but that cannot be easily assessed by a paper-and-pencil test (Evans, 1985; Greaney & Madaus, 1985; Haney, 1984). The result may be that instead of teaching students how to be good administrators, university preparation programs will simply teach them how to pass tests.

Minority Recruitment

The adverse effect of teacher competency testing on minority group members is well documented (Flippo, 1986; Gifford, 1986; Kauchak, 1984; Linn et al., 1982; Mercer, 1983; Olson, 1988; Smith, 1984). Given the disproportionately high failure rate of minorities on competency tests, administrator competency testing might not only prevent aspiring minority group members from becoming certified as school administrators, but might also discourage them from considering administration as a career option (Gifford, 1986). This trend has already been observed as a response to teacher competency testing (Olson, 1988).

Legality

Teacher competency testing has been accompanied by legal challenges in many states. Most litigation involves claims that the adverse effect of competency testing on members of minority groups violates rights protected by the fourteenth amendment's equal protection clause or by Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (McCarthy, 1989). If the state can prove that the test is related to a legitimate employment objective (such as improving the quality of the work force), is properly validated (as by the job analysis surveys conducted by NES), and is not accompanied by discriminatory motives, then courts have usually upheld the test, as has been the case in South Carolina, Texas, and Arkansas.

Many challenges to teacher testing have been settled out of court. To date, no settlement has banned the use of a properly validated test to make decisions regarding admission to teacher education programs, certification, or recertification, although Alabama recently discontinued its testing program in the wake of protracted legal struggles. However, courts have required modifications in the test instruments, validation process, and scoring procedures. For example, the state may have to agree to evaluate test items for racial and cultural bias, or to offer remediation and retake opportunities (McCarthy, 1989). Policymakers considering the implementation of administrator competency tests would do well to ensure that tests are properly validated, unbiased, and fairly scored *before* they are forced to make these adjustments by the courts.

Costs

There are numerous costs involved in implementing competency testing. The method of test development determines, to a great extent, initial start-up costs. While neither the Educational Testing Service (EAS test) nor the National Evaluation Systems (NES) would release financial information, use of a standardized test is undoubtedly less expensive than development and validation of an original test. Sources have cited a range of $45,000 to $150,000 as the cost of test development and validation (Flippo, 1986; Rudner, 1987). However, these figures do not provide an accurate estimate of actual costs, since they do not include the costs of revisions, the costs incurred by the state department of education in managing the testing program, the cost of study guide development, or the cost of test administration and scoring.

Information provided by the Florida Department of Education indicates that the University of West Florida received an initial grant of $750,000 to manage the development of a customized administrator competency exam in that state and to conduct test administration for two years. Subsequently, the university received a second grant of $658,793 to administer the test for another two years. A third grant of $10,000 was also awarded to the university to develop a study guide for the exam, bringing the total cost to $1,418,793 for four years of testing (Merlin Mitchell, personal communication, April 5, 1989).

As this example shows, competency testing is an expensive process. Analysts suggest, however, that attempting to cut corners by providing too little time or money for implementation, planning, pilot testing, or evaluation may result in a complete waste of resources (Anderson & Pipho, 1984). The upshot is that if a state wants a competency test for administrators, it must be willing to pay for it.

Alternatives to Administrator Competency Testing

Pipho (1985) has noted that "nearly every large education reform effort of the past few years has either mandated a new form of testing or expanded use of existing testing" (p. 19). Testing is the traditional route to effectiveness. It is an easy, familiar, and thus safe response to the call for tough standards—a way to evaluate people numerically rather than qualitatively. Since a research base does not exist to support its efficacy (Ellwein et al., 1988), our over-reliance on it as a method of educational reform may be due to political reasons (the pressure to support tough standards) or practical reasons (we have not discovered better ways of accomplishing our objectives).

What alternatives to competency testing are possible? How can reforms facilitate and stimulate rather than mandate? Following are alternative practices being used in several states, as well as practices policymakers may wish to consider.

1. **Assessment centers:** Missouri, in addition to a paper-and-pencil competency test, requires each administrative certification candidate to participate in an assessment center. Each candidate is required to pay the fee for the assessment (currently $400). The state intends to use assessment results not only for screening out unqualified candidates, but also to match school needs with the strengths of qualified candidates. While issues regarding assessment centers are beyond the scope of this paper, they do provide a more holistic approach to evaluation than does a paper-and-pencil test.

2. **On-the-job training and assessment:** North Carolina has developed a Quality Assurance Program including two levels of certification. To attain the second level of certification, two years of administrative experience are required. During this time the new principal works with a mentor principal who is also responsible for assessing the novice principal's on-the-job mastery of state-developed competencies.

Florida utilizes a similar approach for its Level II certification. Level II certification candidates must serve for a minimum of one year as assistant principals, intern principals, or interim principals. During this time they must participate in a district-developed training program and are evaluated on their demonstration of successful performance of the state-developed principal competencies. An issue involved with intern/mentor-evaluator relationships is the blurring of the lines between formative evaluation (used for professional growth) and summative evaluation (used for employment decisions).

Competency Testing Issues

Is there any correlation between test scores and on-the-job performance?

Will competency testing drive the curriculum? If so, is this necessarily bad?

Does testing have an adverse effect on minorities?

Will testing programs be subject to legal challenge?

Do the results of testing justify the expenditures involved?

3. **On-the-job assessment without training:** Connecticut uses a professional skills assessment by a team of educators, including one statewide assessor, but provides no additional training for certification candidates.

4. **Alternative forms of testing:** The Educational Testing Service is developing an alternative to a paper-and-pencil minimum competency test for teachers ("Educational Testing," 1988). This alternative test will include such features as computer simulations and interactive video segments. Perhaps a similar alternative test could be developed for administrators.

5. **Multiple indicators of competency:** Instead of a single form of assessment (e.g., the competency test), states could use a combination of the suggestions listed above. Multiple forms of assessment would increase the validity of the evaluation (Costa, 1989; Haney & Madaus, 1989; Neill & Medina, 1989; Shepherd, 1989). Shulman (1987) recommends a combination of written assessments, assessment center exercises, documentation of performance during supervised field experience, and direct observation of practice by trained observers.

6. **Better Recruitment Strategies:** Traditionally, candidates for certification self-select; that is, they make a decision to obtain administrative certification and then proceed to fulfill coursework and testing requirements necessary to do so. Competency testing serves only to decrease the size of this pool by eliminating the least qualified of these candidates while doing nothing to improve the quality of the remaining pool (Darling-Hammond & Wise, 1983; Franzosa, 1985). More vigorous recruiting efforts for both minority and non-minority candidates would increase the quality and quantity of the entire pool of candidates seeking administrative credentials.

Recruiting high quality minority and non-minority *teaching* candidates would also prove beneficial to the administrative pool. Wise argues that scholarships, fellowships, and loans to prospective educators, higher teacher salaries, and professionalization of the teacher's role will serve to improve the quality of the teaching pool (cited in Brandt, 1983). These measures would have a ripple effect on the quality of the administrative pool since almost all administrators currently come from the teaching pool.

7. **Improved Administrator Preparation:** Demographics indicate that the school administration work force is "graying," with a high percentage of turnover due to retirement expected in upcoming years. Thus, the next few years are a crucial window of change in which improvements in the preparation of administrators can reap consequential benefits. Several efforts are underway to improve administrator preparation through higher entry standards, more rigorous academic courses, field experiences, and the like (see National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 1989).

Considerations for Policymakers

Based on the issues and problems that have surfaced during the implementation of student and teacher competency testing programs, considerations and recommendations for policymakers follow.

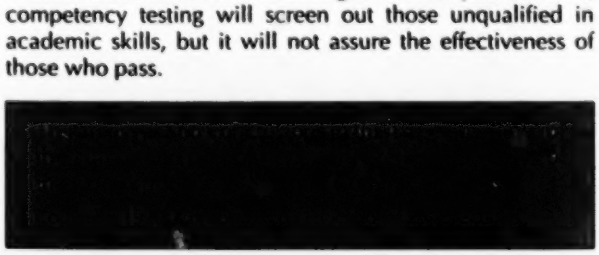
1. Clarify stated and unstated objectives to be accomplished through administrator competency testing. Are objectives political or educational? Are they symbolic or real? Are administrator competency tests a viable way of accomplishing desired objectives?

2. Determine the costs of developing and implementing administrator competency testing as compared to the costs of other strategies to upgrade the quality of school administrators. From what programs is the money being diverted to pay for testing? Are there alternative, more effective uses for money being spent on administrator competency testing?

3. Study the impact of administrator competency testing in states that have adopted such mandates before investing money in the test development process. How are classrooms and schools affected by results of competency testing? How do various stakeholders (e.g., teachers, parents, community, other administrators) lose or gain by the imposition of competency testing (Ellwein et al., 1988)? Are the tests screening out unqualified candidates? Are the tests screening out *only* those who are unqualified, or are they also screening out qualified candidates who are poor test-takers?

4. Since legal challenges are likely, make certain that administrator competency tests follow legal principles established in previous competency testing cases. Clarify the employment objective for giving the test. Develop a validation process that demonstrates a relationship between administrator competency tests and the objectives for using the tests. Review the test for racial and cultural bias. Work collaboratively with universities in establishing curricular alignment between university preparation programs and test content.

5. Be realistic about what testing can accomplish. At best, competency testing will screen out those unqualified in academic skills, but it will not assure the effectiveness of those who pass.



6. Consider some of the alternatives to administrator competency testing mentioned above.

Conclusion

The student and teacher competency testing movements have been fraught with difficulties. Competency testing for administrators may experience less difficulty than these previous movements by heeding the lessons that they have taught us. Nonetheless, policymakers considering the implementation of administrator competency testing should be realistic about what the tests can achieve and aware of their limitations. Competency testing should, at best, be used as one indicator among many of an individual's competency to be a school administrator.

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The author would like to thank Colleen Gilrane for research assistance with the cost section of this paper.

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POLICY BULLETIN No. 8
May 1990

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